

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-17

The January 1975 Thai Elections:  
Power to the . . . ?

150 Soi 20 Sukhumvit Road  
Bangkok 11, Thailand  
January 31, 1975

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

This month I had planned to write on a different and more general topic -- the connection between political institutions and economic development -- but after looking over the results of the January 26 election, I thought it worthwhile to do a followup to my letter of last month. By going back and comparing the outcome of this election with previous ones, some significant trends emerge which go far to explain the current difficulties in forming a stable government. Put together with what we know about the rural revolt (which I discussed briefly last time), we can also see clearly the message which the kingdom's rural subjects are trying to communicate to the political leaders in Bangkok.

Others may and probably will differ on various points. These are my interpretations, and I present them in hopes they will evoke a response from others concerned with this issue. The election obviously needs much more study, using far more detailed information than is now available to me. My purpose is simply to present some preliminary conclusions based on data available in the papers a few days after the election.

My overall conclusions are three. First, as revealed by the political orientations of the strongest parties, Thai voters are consistently extremely conservative -- indeed surprisingly so. Unfortunately they cannot decide whether they want to be ruled by military conservatives or civilian conservatives, hence the current troubles in forming a government. Second, the voting patterns depict a clear picture of rural protest. Third, the government resulting from the January elections will have to be a weak one, with an evident shift of power to those groups best organized: the military and the bureaucracy. Moreover, the government will not be able to take decisive action on the major problems facing the nation. As a result, we may expect protest movements and urban unrest to continue, and possibly accelerate.

January 26: The Basic Data

Table 1 presents the results of the election. Of 42 parties, but 21 succeeded in gaining seats in the assembly. The table is organized according to political orientation, in a way that makes the results of the election easier to comprehend. Since this was one of the cleanest elections in Thai history, the impressive vote for the military-affiliated parties seems to prove that the military has nothing to fear from free elections per se. The behavior of senior military leaders, eschewing any public participation in the campaign, was also a favorable precedent for the future.

---

*Jeffrey Race is an Institute Fellow studying how the institutions of the past influence people's behavior toward one another today. His current area of interest is Southeast Asia.*



Party	Number of candidates	Number elected						Percent elected	Percent of total house	
		BKK	C	S	N	NE	TTL			
<u>UTPP successor parties</u> (The military right)										
1. Social Justice (Dharma Sangkom)	237	-	14	7	6	18	45	19.0	16.7	
2. Thai Nation (Chart Thai)	210	2	9	3	3	11	28	13.3	10.4	
3. Social Nationalist (Sangkom Chart Niyom)	146	-	7	1	2	6	16	13.3	10.4	
4. Social Agrarian (Kaset Sangkom)	121	-	4	1	10	4	19	15.7	7.1	
<u>Democrat successor parties</u> (The civilian right)										
5. Democrat (Prachatiptat)	231	23	11	17	16	5	72	31.1	26.8	
6. Social Action (Kit Sangkom)	230	1	2	3	7	5	18	7.8	6.7	
7. Democracy (Prachatiptatai)	82	-	1	1	-	-	2	2.4	.7	
8. People's Sovereignty (Athipat)	25	-	-	1	-	1	2	8.0	.7	
<u>The middle</u>										
9. New Force (Palang Mai)	106	-	2	-	3	7	12	11.3	4.5	
10. Thai (Thai)	45	-	1	-	2	1	4	8.9	1.5	
<u>The left</u>										
11. Socialist (Sangkom Niyom)	82	-	-	2	2	11	15	18.3	5.6	
12. Socialist United Front (Naew Ruam Sangkom Niyom)	74	-	-	-	-	10	10	13.5	3.7	
<u>Minor parties</u>										
13. National Revival (Fuenfoo Chart Thai)	97	-	1	-	-	2	3	3.1	1.1	
14. Peaceful People (Santichon)	78	-	5	-	3	-	8	10.3	3.0	
15. Economist (Sethakorn)	74	-	-	-	-	1	1	1.4	.4	
16. Agriculturalist (Kasetkorn)	36	-	1	-	-	-	1	2.8	.4	
17. People's Force (Palang Rasadorn)	32	-	1	-	-	1	2	6.3	.7	
18. Free People (Serichon)	31	-	-	-	1	-	1	3.3	.4	
19. Labor (Raeng Ngarn)	28	-	-	-	1	-	1	3.6	.4	
20. People's Justice (Pracha Dharm)	26	-	-	-	-	6	6	23.1	2.2	
21. Thai Earth (Phaendin Thai)	22	-	-	-	-	2	2	9.1	.7	
22. Provincial Develop- ment (Pattana Changwat)	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	100.0	.4	



A disappointing aspect of the election was the low turnout, only 33% in Bangkok, and some 60% nationwide. This could have been predicted partly on the basis of the large and confusing number of candidates, but it appears also to have resulted from a feeling that "it doesn't matter anyway." Our figures show, however, that it indeed "does matter."

January 26: Political Geography

Table 2 is abstracted from the data presented in Table 1 and illustrates the regional distribution of votes by political tendency. The UTPP successor parties, representing the military right in alliance with local notables, were strongest, compared to other parties, in the Central Plain and the Northeast. Its miserable performance in Bangkok reveals the results of education and communications on electoral preferences and is a sign of things to come for the military right. The Democrats, representing the civilian right in alliance with its own network of local notables, did best in Bangkok, almost matching their record clean sweep of Bangkok in the 1969 election. Its next strongest center of support was in the South.

Table 2: Regional Distribution of Votes by Political Tendency

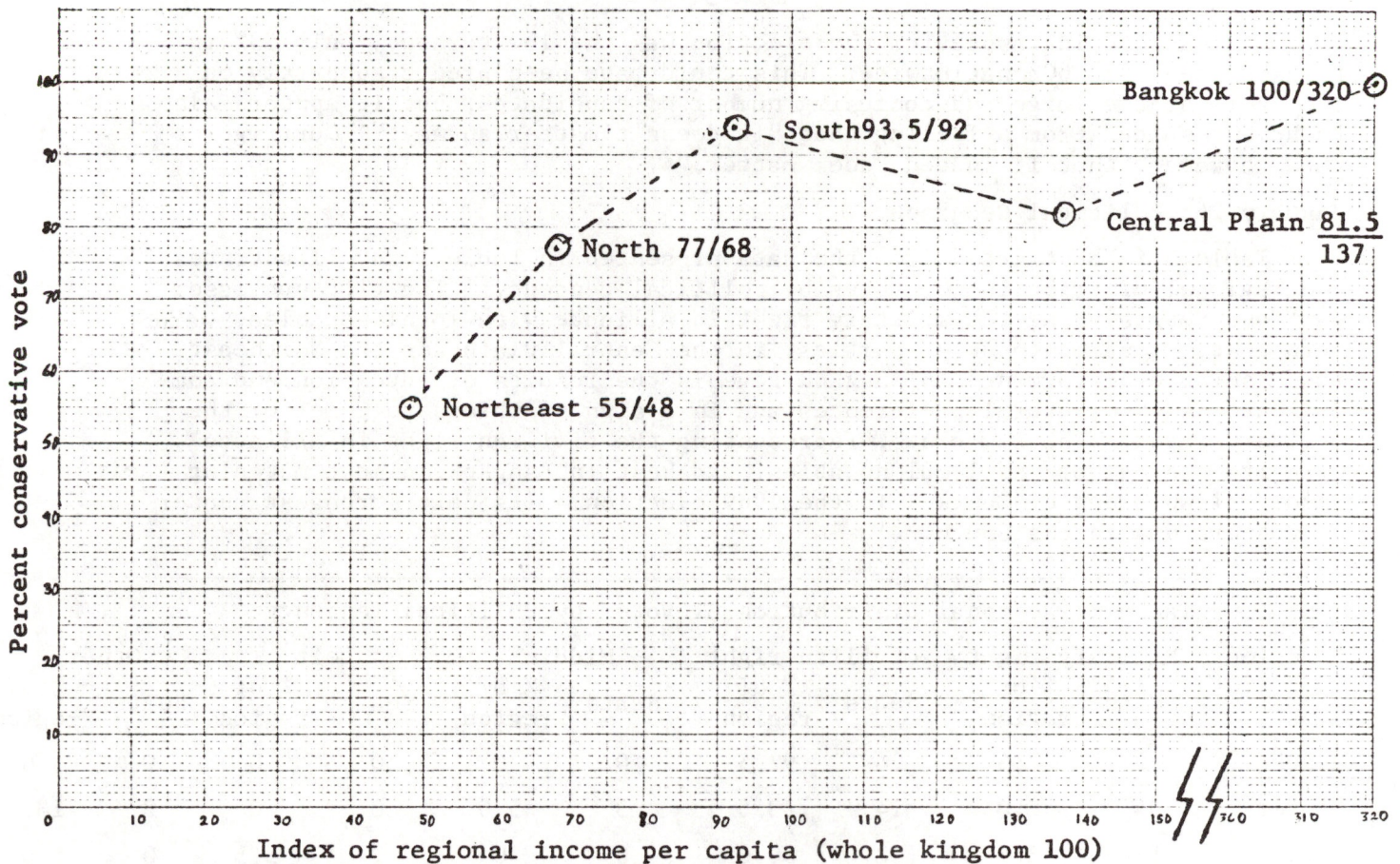
Region	Military right		Civilian right		Middle		Left		Other	
	Seats	% of region	Seats	% of region	Seats	% of region	Seats	% of region	Seats	% of region
Bangkok	2	7.5	24	92.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Center	34	58.0	14	23.5	3	5.0	0	0	8	13.5
South	12	33.5	22	60.0	0	0	2	5.5	0	0
North	21	37.0	23	40.0	5	9.0	2	3.5	6	10.5
Northeast	39	43.0	11	12.0	8	9.0	21	23.0	12	13.0

The interpretation of the votes for the other three groups requires a bit more detailed explanation. I had expected the "middle" -- the Thai and New Force parties -- to appeal to the new middle class, bureaucrats, and professional people, hence deriving significant support from Bangkok and the Central Plain. In fact almost completely the reverse occurred: the middle parties got no seats in Bangkok, and but three in the Central Plain. Their strongest support was in the North and the Northeast. We note a similar phenomenon for the left and "other" parties: no support in Bangkok, some in the Central Plain, and more in the South, North and Northeast. One interpretation suggests itself clearly: the votes for the left and the smaller parties not affiliated with either the UTPP bloc or the civilian conservative bloc represent a protest against the economic and political domination of Bangkok. And although the Thai and New Force parties made a somewhat different appeal in their platforms, they were perceived in this traditional way.

There is some rather striking evidence to confirm this hunch that the pattern of electoral results represents a rural protest against the dominance of Bangkok. Chart 1 (next page) demonstrates the relationship between conservative vote and relative regional income per capita. The vertical axis is computed by adding the percentage of votes in the region for the military and civilian conservative

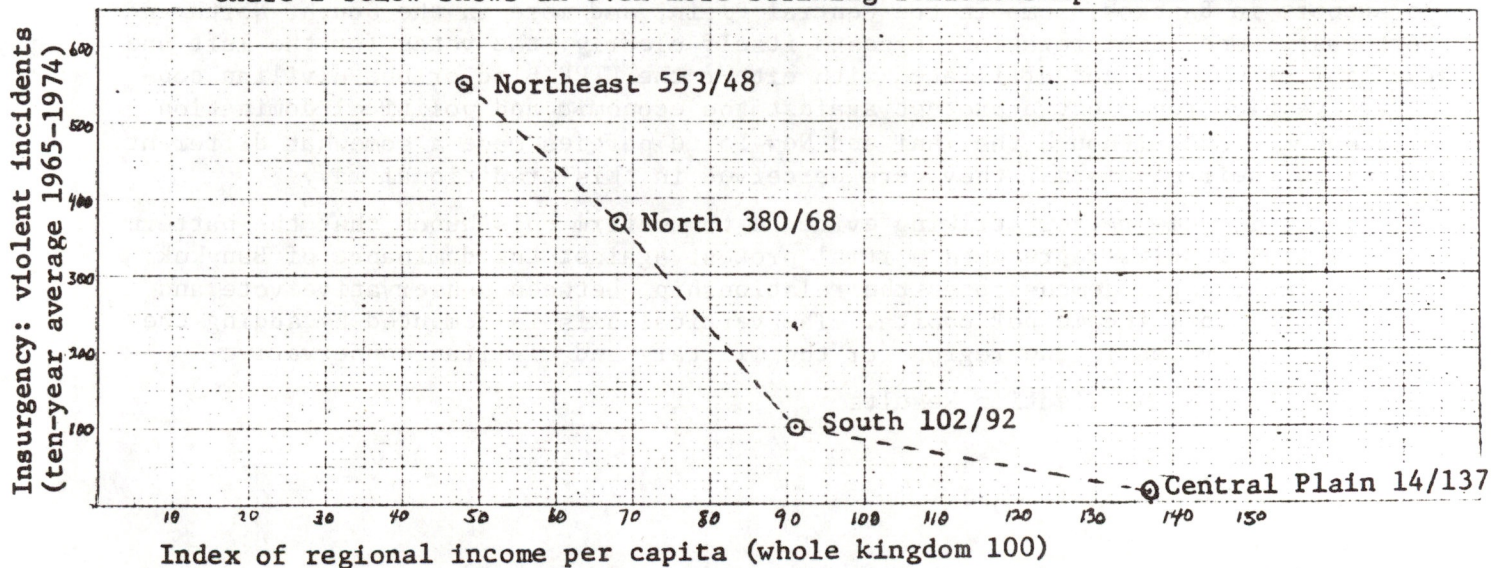
LEFT: Table 1 -- The Election Results





groups, while the horizontal axis is the index of regional per capita income with the whole kingdom as 100. The resulting curve shows a marked, though not perfect and not linear, correspondence between the income of a region and its percentage of conservative vote. The Northeast, poorest of all, gives but 55% of its seats to the conservatives (still an impressively high percentage), while Bangkok, wealthiest, most powerful, and with the most to protect, gives the conservatives 100% of its seats.

Chart 2 below shows an even more striking relationship which increases our





confidence that significant segments of the rural population are dissatisfied and trying to say so. Chart 1 illustrated the relationship between legal protest -- left party and minor party vote -- and regional income. Chart 2 does the same thing for illegal protest: violent incidents in the rural revolt (in this case, a ten-year average of violent incidents by region). The connection is quite clear: the higher the regional per capita income, the lower the violence.

#### The New House

Table 3 presents data on the composition of the new House of Representatives, again broken down into our political tendency categories. Several conclusions are readily apparent. First is the large proportion of the house going to the UTPP successor parties, the military right, testimony to the solid conservatism of the Thai voter or, from a different political perspective, proof of the extent to which the ignorant farmer is still fooled about his true interests. The percentage of the house in the hands of civilian rightwing parties is only slightly less, and in combination with the vote to the military right confirms our point about the overwhelmingly conservative nature of Thai politics. The left, by comparison, has but 9.3% of the seats.

Table 3: Composition of the House of Representatives

Political persuasion	Number of candidates	Number elected	Percent elected	Percent of house
Military right	710	108	15.2	40.1
Civilian right	568	94	16.6	34.9
Middle	147	16	10.9	6.0
Left	156	25	16.1	9.3
Others	678	26	4.2	9.7

A second inference we may readily draw is that while Thai are broadly conservative, they are unable to make up their minds which brand of conservatives will represent them and rule the nation: the seats are split almost evenly between the two claimants to the conservative mantle.

We may draw yet a third very interesting inference from these data. One of the rallying cries of the election was that the right was "buying votes" and that "money is all that matters." As evidence such critics point now to the large percentage of seats obtained by the wealthy military-affiliated parties. In fact, of course, such a large percentage might have come about due to the actual popularity of such parties and their candidates. The only way to know which is true is to look at the percentage of candidates elected, adjusted for money spent. If money truly matters, the wealthy parties would be able to get a higher percentage of their candidates elected, despite presumptively less appealing candidates. A look at the data shows that the reverse is true: the wealthy military-affiliated parties actually succeeded in electing a smaller percentage of their candidates (15.2%) than either the somewhat less wealthy civilian rightists (16.6%) or even the impecunious leftists (16.1%). This inference is a bit tentative, since we do not have, and probably cannot get, exact



campaign spending figures, and moreover some parties contested seats only where they felt they had support. Overall, however, I believe the conclusion is warranted: the voters have more intelligence than they get credit for.

The same column on percentage of candidates elected reveals in another way that the voters have the ability to discriminate. Contrast the percentage of candidates elected as between the "middle" parties and the "other" group: both, we concluded, are perceived as protest vehicles. Yet the "middle" parties were two and one-half times as successful as the "other" parties in having their candidates elected; hence they must have had some other advantage. Since it wasn't money, it must have been the appeal of the candidates.

Past, Present . . . Future?

It's useful to know where we are now, but even more so to know where we are going. We can get a bearing on this by comparing data on the 1975 election with the results of two earlier elections: those of 1969 and February 1957. The comparison is summarized in Table 4, and the trends, and continuities, are quite striking. The drop in the "military right" vote is very large in the 1975

Table 4: Changing Patterns in House Composition

Political persuasion	1957		1969		1975	
	Party	Percent of house	Party	Percent of house	Party	Percent of house
Military right	Seri Manangkhasila Progov't independents Progov't fragments of other parties	61.5	United Thai People's Party Progov't independents	67.5	Thai Nation Social Justice Social Agrarian Social Nationalist	40.1
Civilian right	Democrat	20.5	Democrat	25.0	Democrat Democracy Social Action People's Sovereignty	34.9
Middle	-----	----	-----	----	Thai New Force	6.0
Left	Free Democrat Economist Hyde Park Freedom	14.5	People Economist United Front Democratic Front	6.0	Socialist Socialist United Front	9.3
Other	Antigov't independents and fragments of other parties	3.5	Other parties and anti-gov't independents	1.5	Other (see Table 1)	9.7



election; this might be due either to a real drop in the popularity of the military right, or to the greater honesty of the 1975 election. (The military had control of the Ministry of the Interior in both 1957 and 1969.) There is also an unmistakable rising trend in the electoral strength of the civilian right: from 20.5% in February 1957, to 25% in 1969, to 34.9% in 1975. As stock prospectuses say, there is no assurance that present trends will continue, but on the other hand it would be foolish to ignore them.

The strength of the left parties hovers in the range 10%± 4.5%, indicating that the decline in the vote for the military right was shared principally by the civilian right and the middle in 1975, and to a lesser extent by the "other" category.

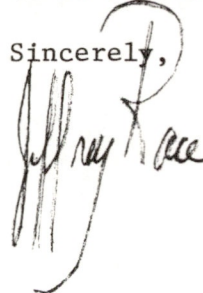
#### Conclusion

The 1975 election confirms the essential conservatism of the Thai electorate, but it poses the problem of the inability at present of Thailand to decide whether military or conservative elites will rule. The long-term shift away from the military is apparent, however. The other point confirmed by the elections (as if the meaning of the gunfire in the countryside needed confirmation) is that there is serious discontent with the current distribution of economic benefits in the kingdom. It would be a serious mistake, however, to conclude that income is all that is at stake here. It is the distribution of power overwhelmingly in favor of Bangkok which permits this distribution of income to persist, and that is the real issue.

For the short term, the ambiguous outcome of the election virtually ensures that a weak government will be formed, and power will slip from the prime minister and cabinet to those who have trained themselves to rule while appearing to obey: the bureaucracy and the military. It seems unlikely that the government will be able to act decisively against the problems confronting the kingdom: inflation, land alienation, income inequality, agricultural backwardness, and hence we may expect protest movements to continue, and perhaps expand.

The people who should be happiest with the results of the election are foreign and local investors and Thailand's conservative foreign allies, for the three elections examined here show no evidence of a shift to the left. There is clearly a shift, but it is from the military elites to the kind of civilian conservative and middle-class parties which are successfully in charge of business as usual elsewhere in the world. The current problem is simply that the underlying long-run trend has brought the military and civilian conservatives so near to equality in elected seats that Thailand is falling between two stools: no one can take command, though either might do so successfully.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J. R. Rice". The signature is stylized with a large, looping initial "J" and a distinct "R".